

**What is claimed is:**

1           1.       A communication method comprising the steps of:  
2           receiving an instant messaging (IM) message from a sender to a recipient;  
3           waiting a predefined time interval for an input from the recipient, the input being  
4 responsive to the IM message; and  
5           automatically replying to the IM message in the absence of an input from the  
6 recipient during the predefined time interval.

1           2.       The method of claim 1, wherein the step of replying to the IM message  
2 comprises the step of:  
3           providing a message indicating the recipient's unavailability to engage in an IM  
4 chat session.

1           3.       The method of claim 1, wherein the step of replying to the IM message  
2 comprises the step of:  
3           providing a message requesting the sender to wait for a predetermined time  
4 period.

1           4.       The method of claim 1, wherein the step of replying to the IM message  
2 comprises the step of:  
3           periodically providing messages, the messages being periodically provided at  
4 predefined time intervals, each message indicating the recipient's unavailability to engage  
5 in an IM chat session during the corresponding predefined time interval.

1           5.       A communication method comprising the steps of:  
2           receiving an instant messaging (IM) message from a first sender to a recipient;  
3           determining whether the recipient is engaged in an IM chat session with second  
4   sender; and  
5           automatically replying to the IM message in response to determining that the  
6   recipient is engaged in the IM chat session with the second sender.

1           6.       The method of claim 5, further comprising the step of:  
2           waiting a predefined time interval prior to replying to the IM message.

1           7.       The method of claim 5, further comprising the step of:  
2           indicating to the first sender that the recipient is engaged in an IM chat session  
3   with the second sender.

1           8.       The method of claim 5, further comprising the step of:  
2           periodically providing messages to the first sender, the messages being  
3   periodically provided at predefined time intervals, each message indicating the recipient's  
4   unavailability to engage in an IM chat session during the corresponding predefined time  
5   interval..

1           9.       The method of claim 5, further comprising the step of:  
2           indicating to the first sender that the recipient is unavailable to engage in an IM  
3   chat session with the first sender.

1           10.     A computer-readable medium comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to receive an  
3     instant messaging (IM) message from a sender to a recipient;  
4           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to wait a  
5     predefined time interval for an input from the recipient, the input being responsive to the  
6     IM message; and  
7           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to reply to the  
8     IM message in the absence of an input from the recipient during the predefined time  
9     interval.

1           11.     The computer-readable medium of claim 10, further comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to provide a  
3     message indicating the recipient's unavailability to engage in an IM chat session.

1           12.     The computer-readable medium of claim 10, further comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to provide a  
3     message requesting the sender to wait for a predetermined time period.

1           13.     The computer-readable medium of claim 10, further comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to periodically  
3     provide messages, the messages being periodically provided at predefined time intervals,  
4     each message indicating the recipient's unavailability to engage in an IM chat session  
5     during the corresponding predefined time interval.

1           14. A computer-readable medium comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to receive an  
3           instant messaging (IM) message from a first sender to a recipient;  
4           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to determine  
5           whether the recipient is engaged in an IM chat session with second sender; and  
6           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to reply to the  
7           IM message in response to determining that the recipient is engaged in the IM chat  
8           session with the second sender.

1           15. The computer-readable medium of claim 14, further comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to wait a  
3           predefined time interval prior to replying to the IM message.

1           16. The computer-readable medium of claim 14, further comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to indicate that  
3           the recipient is engaged in an IM chat session with the second sender.

1           17. The computer-readable medium of claim 14, further comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to periodically  
3           provide messages to the first sender, the messages being periodically provided at  
4           predefined time intervals, each message indicating the recipient's unavailability to engage  
5           in an IM chat session during the corresponding predefined time interval..

1           18.     The computer-readable medium of claim 14, further comprising:  
2           computer-readable code adapted to instruct a programmable device to indicate that  
3     the recipient is unavailable to engage in an IM chat session with the first sender.

1           19.     A communication system comprising:  
2           means for receiving an instant messaging (IM) message from a sender to a  
3     recipient;  
4           means for receiving an input from the recipient in response to the IM message;  
5           means for determining whether the recipient has provided an input during a  
6     predefined time interval; and  
7           means for replying to the IM message in response to determining that the recipient  
8     has not provided an input during the predefined time interval.

1           20.     A communication system comprising:  
2           instant-messaging (IM) receive logic configured to receive an IM message from a  
3     sender to a recipient;  
4           input-receive logic configured to receive an input from the recipient in response to  
5     the IM message;  
6           determining logic configured to determine whether the recipient has provided an  
7     input during a predefined time interval; and  
8           reply logic configured to reply to the IM message in response to determining that  
9     the recipient has not provided an input during the predefined time interval.

1           21.     The system of claim 20, wherein the determining logic comprises:  
2           a timer configured to track elapsed time from a receiving of an IM message.

- 1           22.     The system of claim 20, wherein the reply logic comprises:
- 2           message-generation logic configured to generate a message, the message being
- 3           indicative of the recipient's unavailability to engage in an IM chat session.